

## Singapore Management University Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

---

Perspectives@SMU

Centre for Management Practice

---

4-2018

# Why smart firms are out and proud about LGBT expats

Singapore Management University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/pers>

Part of the [Human Resources Management Commons](#), and the [Transpersonal Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Citation

Singapore Management University. Why smart firms are out and proud about LGBT expats. (2018). Perspectives@SMU.  
**Available at:** <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/pers/391>

This Magazine Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Centre for Management Practice at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives@SMU by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email [libIR@smu.edu.sg](mailto:libIR@smu.edu.sg).

## Why smart firms are out and proud about LGBT expats

30 Apr 2018



This article is republished with permission from [BusinessThink at UNSW Business School](#). You can access the original article [here](#).

*Retaining talent is a bottom-line issue as well as duty of care*

Talent shortages are pressing international businesses to re-evaluate how they tackle employee mobility as globalisation grows.

Typically, international moves are on the plans of ambitious professionals, as appointment to a role in a new territory is widely recognised as an astute career-building step. However, some face greater challenges in the expatriate experience than others.

For lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) employees, a growing stream of research shows there's more to consider in an international appointment. For starters, rules and regulations around same-sex relations and relationships vary between countries, with around 75 countries criminalising the homosexual act, and 13 deeming it punishable by death.

Anti-discrimination and harassment laws exist in 76 countries, while there's recognition of same sex unions in just 34. Add to this a multitude of cultural and religious mindsets across the globe. And, laws and attitudes within one jurisdiction may not consistently apply.

Such issues are on top of the standard relocation challenges for employees taking on international assignments.

With the cost of failed international assignments running high – up to three times the expat's annual salary – organisations across the world are actively seeking ways to keep LGBT expats in their talent pools happy and safe.

A recently published Stonewall guide, *Safe Travels: Global Mobility for LGBT Staff*, outlines initiatives at BP, Vodafone, EY, Barclays and P&G, among others.

Despite studies on issues facing LGBT employees – and their mobility – resounding with details of discrimination and stigmatisation, it's not all bad news, according to **Varina Michaels**, a UNSW Business School lecturer and management consultant whose research focuses on identity.

When compared with their heterosexual counterparts, research shows lesbian, gay and bisexual people as a proportion of their population are not only over-represented in the senior management workforce but are also – against the odds – highly mobile. Research on the transgender experience remains nascent.

"We often think of sexual minorities as being discriminated against in business, but there are clear advantages these groups bring that can be leveraged all round," Michaels reports.

## CONTEXT OVERRIDES EVERYTHING

One advantage is that LGBT people tend to be experienced in the management of their identities – they go through a self-exploration process and make decisions about whether to conceal their sexual orientation or disclose it, both to their employer and in the wider community, Michaels says.

"Identity management is a very useful skill in business requiring cognitive flexibility that can help with emotional intelligence in management roles and in adapting to cues in new cultures. Greater awareness of their surroundings actually helps the expatriate adjustment process."

That said, the decision to disclose a sexual identity is "very individual", she notes. "And in a new cultural, social and legal environment, it typically takes even more time."

While organisations promote the importance of 'bringing your whole self to work' and psychological stress is often the upshot of concealment, circumstances and personal choice essentially come into play.

"Some find it's worthwhile disclosing their identity to the organisation, particularly when additional support is available, to reap the financial benefits and career growth of an expatriate assignment," Michaels says.

"In some cases, they'll keep it under wraps on assignment to enjoy these benefits."

Negative stories abound, however, about active discrimination against expats who come out in certain countries, backlash from colleagues, lack of training and organisational support, all of which varies between locations.

An innovative 2015 study, *Oh, the places you won't go as an LGBT expat!*, by Griffith University's Ruth McPhail and Singapore Institute of Management's Yvonne McNulty, reveals context overrides everything, in spite of what a company may wish to do for their LGBT potential assignees – and all may not be what it first seems.

Michaels cites the example of a participant in the study who had worked in several countries including Yemen, where same sex relations are illegal and punishable, but he also found a

subsequent posting to Egypt, where there are no laws prohibiting homosexuality, equally unacceptable.

Another was worried about his reception in Kosovo, a Muslim community, but discovered an active gay sub-culture there, despite wider spread discrimination against homosexuality.

## WHAT ABOUT THE FAMILY

Rather than preclude people who identify as LGBT from being offered international assignments, experts are urging organisations to allow candidates to make their own decisions, and frontrunners are emerging.

Big Four consulting firm EY opts for "very open conversations" with LGBT candidates and others, says EY's Asia Pacific diversity and inclusion leader **Katrina North**.

"The safety of our employees is absolutely paramount, so we're open about explaining the state of play in particular jurisdictions and what we can do as a firm, giving as much information as we can so they are aware and can choose how to proceed," North says.

"Some people just say 'no', and some want to go."

A deal-breaking question for many LGBT employees, when offered an international assignment, is whether or not their family can accompany them.

For jurisdictions where the law precludes visas for LGBT employees' dependent partners, EY offers "advice based on our experience for how they can manage that", says North. In such locations, the firm has many LGBT expats whose partners have gone independently.

With same-sex marriage and adoption legally on the rise in Western nations, learning how to manage LGBT families for international assignments is shifting on to the agenda of corporations' mobility teams, but not fast enough, Michaels says.

Spouses' failure to adapt to the new environment is the top reason why expat assignments fall over, making the expats' successful performance highly dependent on the adjustment of partners or children who relocate with them.

In same-sex relationships, compared with the traditional model of an expatriate man with a woman as 'the trailing spouse', the other half of an LGBT couple may have more difficulty fitting in.

## SUPPORT NETWORKS

Apart from issues of spousal visas, immigration, healthcare and tax laws which vary between countries and are typically in the sights of employers when outlining potential challenges, there's a litany of more nuanced concerns, such as lack of acceptance at work events and in the wider culture.

"These cause strain in the relationship and in some places there's heavy discrimination to be fought against," says Michaels, noting a dearth of information on the experiences of children in expatriate families who identify as LGBT or might be questioning their sexuality.

Organisations need to go beyond the diversity rhetoric and show it, she says.

"Increasingly we're seeing LGBT issues factored into policies and procedures, but in the move to more inclusive cultures there should be pre-departure training to give people a better understanding and access to resources on the cultural and social aspects of different locations. They need support networks and to learn from people on the ground."

EY is making headway. While its pre-departure training for international assignments does not single out LGBT issues, the firm runs a global Unity network for LGBT employees with chapters in most offices – and virtual links in others – through which connections can be made and information exchanged.

"Some are very social and others are more about having a voice externally," says North.

Allies training has also been introduced in the Asia-Pacific to raise wider awareness of EY's LGBT employees' reality. In these voluntary forums, LGBT leaders give colleagues insights on their experiences and audience members can pose questions they "might not otherwise be comfortable to ask".

Even in locations where same sex relationships are not legally recognised but have a level of cultural acceptance, the firm steps up to support local Pink Dot events.

"The very public display of support is well received," North says.

Michaels believes global organisations will keep moving on LGBT expatriate issues because "beyond duty of care and the moral obligation, these are also bottom-line issues".

It's a matter ripe for ongoing investigation, not only by business school researchers, but also by global HR and diversity practitioners, Michaels says.

*Follow us on Twitter (@sgsmuperspectiv) or like us on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/PerspectivesAtSMU>)*